MFACC HOLIDAY BULLETIN

December, 1994

Vol. 11, No. 12

This is the monthly bulletin of the Mid-Florida Atari Computer Club. In it are articles written or submitted by members who feel they are of interest to all users of Atari computers.

You may wish to join a computer club to share the beneficial aspects of having others around you who have similar machines, like interests, and a desire to share what they know with others. A users group can help you understand things about your computer that they have already discovered.

Our membership, at $12.00 per year, entitles you to the newsletter, access to the disk libraries, and club meetings where all the fun and education happen on a monthly basis.

We meet in the Orlando Library building downtown Orlando, 101 E Central Blvd. At 1:30PM on the second Sunday of each month. Feel free to join us there next month to learn more about the wonderful world of computers, and Atari computers in particular.

For Newsletter Exchange

M.F.A.C.C.
C/O Bob Smith
3729 Yosemite Dr.
Orlando, FL 32818

M.F.A.C.C. Affiliated BBS Listing:

Top Gun	381-5403
Starbase 1	381-2610
Inner Core	294-5183
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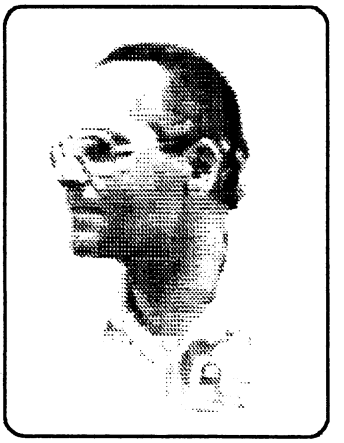
Mid-Florida Atari Computer Club

MID-FLORIDA ATARI COMPUTER CLUB

From The President



December, 1994 is here. (How many of you didn't realize that??) Pretty soon we will be fa-la-laling, carolling, treeing (it had to rhyme), decking, singing, partying, etc'ing. I believe you get the idea and if you don't, let me try this way:

"IT'S THE HOLIDAY SEASON!!!!!!"

It is a happy and giving season. It is a sad and missing season. It is a warm and fuzzy season. It also that and more. I hope that the season you choose will be the very best and wonderful for you and yours. Let me change the pace of things here, to do a little housekeeping and make some announcements:

First:
======

One of our esteemed members became a parent for the second time. Mrs. Beth Baggs, wife of Ray Baggs, aka Hermit, gave birth to a *BEAUTIFUL* baby girl. This young lady is named Rebecca Kate Baggs and has all the fine and beautiful features of her mother and older sister, Sara. Now you will ask what did her daddy give her? Well, as far as I know, she will inherit her daddy's large monitary fortune and perhaps his smile. (I had to put something down, or daddy would not be a happy puppy.) One thing that her father did tell me directly, was that he was getting both Sara and Rebecca a Falcon and a Jaguar for each. Now that is what I call a real nice dad. Don't forget to congratulate Ray and be sure and ask him how his diaper processing is coming.

WELCOME INTO THE WORLD,
REBECCA KATE BAGGS!!
AND TO THE FAMILY, WELL DONE!!

Second:
=======

Our Club Secretary, Robert Raymond, a master trainman, has announced that he will be giving up those small, itty-bitty, teensy-weensy little N gauge type trains and finally become a real collector and get into "O" gauge. He has admitted that he can no longer stand to be called a wimp and wants to be an engineer of a "MAN'S" gauge - "O".

Third:
======

I have just found out that we have a real live "Brewmeister" in our Club. This "Brewmeister" has gone into the beer business on a grand scale and Budweiser will be getting a run for their money. This gentleman has agreed to supply all current members a years supply of his world famous brew to get the product out and well known. All you have to do is ask him and.... "wait a minute, who is he?", you ask? Oops sorry, this fine gentleman is our former secretary, vice president and retired bike racer.... That last clue should give our older members the identity. Now as I was saying, all you have to do is ask him and he will take names and distribute later. Folks, his brew is ***good...***

Fourth:
=======

Our new meeting hours now provides for play time before our meeting which will take place at 3:00 PM instead of 1:30 PM. Our meeting room will still open at 1:30 PM and the Libraries (8 Bit and ST) will be available for your consideration. Previous newsletters will be available and several experts will be there to help answer questions that our members have. This arrangement will be tried for four months and will be evaluated and it is my belief that we will have a much better turn out at our meetings.

Ok, now I've done the housekeeping and put up the tree, decorated the halls, tested the lights, put out the etc., I guess the last thing to do is to.....

WISH EVERYONE, MEMBER, NON-MEMBER, FAMILY AND THE WHOLE WORLD, WARMEST WISHES AND THE BEST HOLIDAY SEASON EVER!!!!!

FROM ME AND OFFICERS OF THE MID-FLORIDA ATARI COMPUTER CLUB!!

Minutes Of The M.F.A.C.C. General Meeting

Minutes for MFACC
November 13, 1994

The meeting began at 1:45pm

OLD BUSINESS

The shuttle demo was reported downed. Instead, a pinball demo would be shown later in its place.

The topic of the Xmas party was raised. Enough response was noted, so it was decided to be held. Robert Raymond was found to be gullible enough to arrange it. A suitable place must be found, and all members called.

Meeting times were discussed. It was felt unanimously that the time for the meeting should be moved back to 3:00pm on sundays. The room would still be opened an hour earlier for set up and pre-meetings. The club voted to try this out for the next four meetings.

Jim Dunkle, a new member, was introduced.

Carey Sparks requested that his board be listed as a MFACC node on the Inner Core.

NEW BUSINESS

Next month, Robert Raymond and/or Scott Prince will hold a Jaguar Demo.

There will also be a surprise demo.

There was a call for a better system for describing files in the library. This led into the idea of a 'disk of the month' club.

The meeting was adjourned at 2:25pm

Some phone numbers you will need to communicate with our club:

President:
Bob Smith ☛ 299-5374

Vice-President:
John Baker ☛ 823-9705

Treasurer:
Bill Baker ☛ 277-3438

Secretary:
Robert Raymond ☛ 896-7404

Librarians:
8-Bit:
Arthur Averett 290-2096

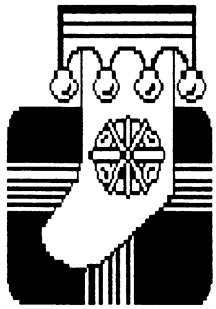
ST:
Rick Sava ☛ 574-6033

Publicity:
☛

This newsletter is produced on an Atari Mega STE-4, using Pagestream 2.2 and printed on a Hewlett Packard Deskjet 500

Treasurer's Report
November, 1994

Opening balance of	815.26
Deposit	000.00
Debit	111.14
Service Charge	8.00
Closing balance	696.12



Birthdays for December

John Waters

All welcomed as new members.

Jim Dunkle

December 13th 7pm Xmas party at Border Cantina. Park Ave in Winter Park. See Robert Raymond or 896-7404

3 single density drives complete $10 each
Large selection of new & used software, games utilities etc. Start mags with disks $1 each.
SM124 St monochrome monitor $75
Hard drive boxes & power supplies $50@
See Bob Smith or call 299-5374

The Right Stuff Awards

Key Issues

by Robert A. Raymond

In our last issue, I moaned about how flight simulators could be improved. Now lets look at the good side of the coin, the first (and given the amount of software development, most likely the last) annual Right Stuff Awards...

Best Start Up: Dive Bomber; In this game, before you could launch your Avenger off the deck of a carrier at night, you had to switch to the navigator's position, turn on the light, then set all sorts of knobs and levers in their correct positions. It was really a fun start to an otherwise poor simulator.

Best Maneuvering Opponents: Mig-29; The baddies here (Chinese and Arabs - the only NATO planes show up in a no-fire scenario) climb, dive, and turn very fluidly. You can have some real fun times clawing your way onto their agile tails, making your victory oh-so-sweet. *Runner up:* Knights of the Skies; their aces are really a handful - you have to be on the ball to down them.

Best Air-to-Air Gunnery: Knights of the Skies; Given the low technology and the uneven burning of the phosphorous on the tracer rounds, World War One bullets tended to fan out slightly in front of you. KOTS simulates this, and forces you to really put some deflection in on your side shots. No 'laser beam cannons' here; you gotta try and get your itty-bitty bullets to hit that jinking plane way out there...

Best Air-to-Air Missile: Mig-29/F-16 Falcon; In both cases, its a matter of holding the target in front of you until your HUD lights up. Mig-29 has a more fluid feel to it, while Falcon feels a little more realistic. Thus, its a toss up.

Best Working Control Panel: This was a tough choice between several candidates, but I had to go with F-16. Here, I felt a greater need to keep an eye on my radar, weapons stores, and airspeed. The constant flipping from control panel to full view and back helped to capture the feel of what real combat must be like.

Best Big Picture Feeling: Reach for the Skies; Many games allow for your comrades to fly to your aid and for enemy planes to carry out their missions sight-unseen. In RFTS, your wingmen will follow you about, warn you of danger, and make fairly decent attacks. The enemy planes will not all concentrate on you, and will try to achieve their missions. I remember a game where my Spitfire got separated from my pals, and the Jerry bomber swarm stretched across Kent to London. Lots of solo passes on bombers, and lots of looking over my shoulder for those 109s! All this fun, and you don't have to sit over a fuel tank!

Best Feel of Speed: B-17; The first time that I got a report of 'Bandits', I saw little specks in front and above us. 'No problem', thinks I, as I manned the forward chin turret. But, that first ME-109 curled towards me, and grew at a shocking rate. I was so surprised that I didn't even get off a shot; he was past my plane and away before I knew what was what!

Best Feel of Flight: Solo Flight; This eight bit game was a favorite of mine for a long time. While the plane flies fairly easily, it needs some attention; the wing might dip a bit, the course might drift. So, every so often, you have to correct it. They got the feeling down just right.

Best Air Navigation: Airbus A320; Flying the airbus is like going on a whirl-wind tour of Europe. There are all sorts of VOR towers to fly to and from, and you can use the supplied air navigation maps to fly on published air routes. Flight Sim II was a close contender, except that so many of the VOR points didn't work right, you could never be sure that the key tower would actually be where the map said it would be.

Biggest Database: Frontier (Elite II); If you look at this sci-fi game as a flight simulator, there are zillions of places to fly to, and all of them have a different feel to them. If you wish to keep this to strictly aircraft, then the winner would be Flight Sim II, with all its many scenery disks.

Best Two Player: F-15 Eagle; While otherwise an old sim, with little realism given today's standards, it does have the ability to be well- flown two player. With one person on the keyboard (acting as Navigator/Weapons Officer), and the other one on the joystick (acting as pilot) you can have some real co-op fun, blasting migs, whining about fuel, and calling the bogies.

And that's the list. Of course, every thing is just my opinion, based on the type of game that I prefer. With my love of realistic simulators, I would have to rank Knights of the Sky and Reach for the Skies as my two favorites; I like my games where kills take some work (notice; no missiles in either game), and you have a lot of leeway in how you go about your mission. Others may disagree (if so, write your own piece!)

With the Atari ST winding down, we have to look to the future for good simulators. I hear that are some air-sims in the works for the Jaguar. Hmmmmmmm.

(Editor's note: Robert Raymond is a prolific writer and programmer in his own right and is also the current Secretary, resident Cumudgeon, Train Master, Wanna-be-Pilot and all around good person of the Mid-Florida Atari Computer Club. This article is one of an monthly ongoing series that Robert writes and is most welcome. However, the views expressed by the Author are his own and do not necessarily represent the views and opinions of the Newsletter Staff, Officers and The Mid-Florida Atari Computer Club. Incidentally, The "Right Stuff Award" is statue sitting on a small WWII shaped fighter aircraft and if you look very closely, you will notice that it is a very good likeness of Mr. Raymond. The nickname of the award is the "ROBBY".

The Newsletter staff appreciates the input of Robert Raymond. Well done!!)

[Printers Note: Due to the editors need for half page Editor Notes he will again be printing the newsletter.]

A Reading From the Book of Sheldon...

By Sheldon Winick

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without computers and was waste and void; and darkness was upon the face of monitor. And the spirit of Atari moved upon the face of the monitors. And Atari said, let there be Pong; and there was Pong, and the interactive light of the computer chip was upon the face of the monitor!

And Pong begat 2600; and 2600 begat 400, and there was a keyboard of sorts. And the 400 begat 800 and a real keyboard. The 800 wandered in the desert and collected all sorts of peripherals and the family grew and prospered. The 800 begat 800XL and 1200XL, then reached the top of the mountain with the 130XE. But Atari saw that there could be more, so the XE begat the ST. And Atari saw that it was good. So the ST begat MegaST, the STe and MegaSTe, and it was still good. So the STe begat the TT030, and it was wonderful!

But the evil 'Gates' had opened, and the great flood covered the earth, destroying most that was good. The evil one told the wandering lost to follow him and he would bring them to the promised land. And most did blindly follow and continue to send him all their gold and wealth for his continual promises of 'new and improved'. The evil one said real computers don't use mice, and the masses believed. The evil one said real computers don't have GUI's, and the masses believed. The evil one said real operating systems must be difficult to use and hard to understand, and the masses believed. Then when the followers numbered nearly all the computer users of the world, and there were but few GUI's yet standing, the evil one said "I will invent a new user-friendly system that will use a mouse and pictures on the screen instead of words, and I will call it 'Windows'"; and the masses send the evil one even more gold.

And darkness again befell the face of the earth. And the kingdom of Atari diminished.

But Atari said, wait, we will try to save the world again. We will go back and make a new computer, and we will call it the Falcon. We will make it all powerful, but will hide its power in the old one-piece case so nobody will know what it really is. And nobody did know what it really was, so it did not prosper. And the darkness of the Gates continued to leave its shadow over all the world.

Atari saw the darkness and said we must have light, so we will go all the way back to the beginning once again. This time we will call the new savior Jaguar instead of Pong. And Jaguar sprung upon the face of the earth, and all saw that it was good. And light again shined upon the face of the monitor.

And Jaguar grew and prospered. And Jaguar begat.....

(Editor's Note: Sheldon Winick is an avid Atari User and his works have appeared in our Newsletter in the past.

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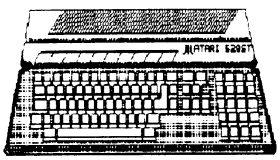
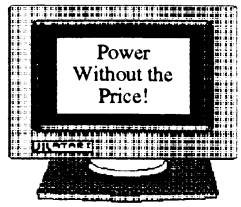
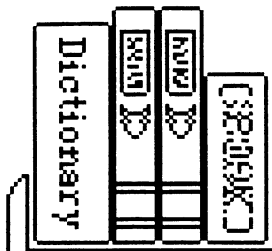


The Falcon has LANDED!!!





For Your Information

Intel Apologizes For Pentium Error Issues "Warranty"

In a letter now posted on the Internet, Intel President Andy Grove has apologized for a computational error in the Pentium chip, and has issued a "life-time warranty" on the chip to users "engaged in work involving heavy-duty scientific/floating point calculations."

Intel has also opened up an 800 number, typically accessed mainly by engineering customers, to all PC users with concerns about the error.

The error was originally discovered by Thomas Nicely, a mathematics professor at Lynchburg College in Virginia, according to John Raftrey, an Intel spokesperson. Nicely determined that the Pentium can return erroneous values for certain division operations.

Grove said, "The group concluded after months of work that (1) an error is only likely to occur at a frequency of the order of once in nine billion floating point divides, and that (2) this many divides in all the programs they evaluated (which included many scientific programs) would require elapsed times of use that would be longer than the mean time to failure of the physical computer subsystems".

"In other words, the error rate a user might see due to the floating point problem would be swamped by other known computer failure mechanisms.
This explained why nobody -- not us, not our OEM (original equipment manufacturer) customers, not the software vendors we worked with, and not the many individual users -- had run into it."

Intel has since fixed the design, and has recently started to produce corrected chips. The error, however, is present in all of the estimated two million Pentium chips based on the original design.

Callers to the special "800" number (800-628-8686) are answered by a "live person," Raferty added. Each call is then routed to a staff member with "the appropriate level of expertise" to handle the particular inquiry.

** IBM to Replace Bad Pentiums **

IBM says it will replace flawed Intel Corp. Pentium chips in its PCs. "IBM considers any problems with the system to be our responsibility," said general manager Bruce Claflin of product and brand management at IBM PC Co. "Our customers bought IBM personal computers. If they have problems, we're going to be there with solutions."

** Gateway to Swap Pentiums, Too **

Following IBM's lead, PC maker Gateway 2000 Inc. says it too will offer selected customers a replacement Pentium chip. The company says that upon determining the customer's need, it will provide a new Pentium chip to replace the flawed model originally provided by Intel Corp. The support will continue throughout the system's life.

"We will incur some additional operational costs offering this level of support, but our customers deserve it," says Ted Waitt, chairman and CEO of Gateway 2000, which specializes in direct market PC sales. "Right now our Pentium demand is stronger than ever," he notes. "We feel that if people just look at the facts as they exist today rather than the perception, demand will continue."

** Dell to Support Pentium Customers **

A Dell spokesman said the company would support those customers who purchased Dell computers with the faulty chips. Reports say that Dell feels the problem is unlikely to affect the typical user. "We're monitoring the situation right now and working very closely with Intel and with our customers," said Dell spokesman Roger Rydell.

** Compaq Sues Packard Bell **

Alleging infringement on three patents in its desktop and notebook machines, Compaq Computer Corp. has sued rival computer maker Packard Bell Electronics Inc.

The Wall Street Journal says the patents at issue, one of which dates back to 1986, relate to power-conservation techniques, graphics systems for monitors and systems to filter commands to the microprocessor.

Packard Bell said in a statement it believes Compaq has no basis for the suit, while Compaq officials declined comment.

** Kodak Shows Cable Photo Service **

Eastman Kodak Co. has demonstrated a potential future interactive photofinishing application in which photos are transmitted over cable TV.

With the Kodak system, a consumer would drop off exposed film at a photofinisher, just like today. The photofinisher would develop and scan the photos into a computer that's linked to the local cable system. Then, the system operator would send an electronic notice to the user that he or she has new images to preview. The user could view small "thumbnail" images of the pictures on a TV or computer and select some to view at full-screen size.

Continued next page ☞

After viewing the photos, the consumer could use the system to place orders for prints and enlargements, as well as send them to friends and family.

The consumer could create custom photographs by recomposing and pasting pictures onto creatively designed backgrounds to make personalized gifts and photo greeting cards.

**** HP Plans Cable Modem System ****

Hewlett-Packard Co. says it plans to develop a cable modem system for hybrid fiber/coax networks. HP notes that the system will give PCs the same kind of interactive access traditional modems provide, only much faster.

HP's cable modem system will allow cable operators to provide access to online services, the Internet and potentially other services for home-PC users. A cable modem connects a PC to a standard coaxial cable TV line in the same way that a traditional modem connects a PC to a telephone line. HP says its cable modem system will include all the hardware and software necessary for an end-to-end solution from the home to the head end (central cable office).

**** Safer Keyboard in the Works ****

Officials with the Ergonomics Laboratory say they are closer to developing a safer keyboard that could serve more than 30 million Americans at risk of wrist and hand problems such carpal tunnel syndrome, tendinitis and muscle disorders.

Lab Director Dr. David Rempel said, "Most companies that employ heavy-duty computer users, like programmers, word processors, reporters and data entry operators, are unable to halt the rising number of cases of workers with muscle, nerve and tendon problems.

Rempel is quoted as saying keyboard design features, such as hand position and the amount of force used in typing, may play a role in the development of the syndrome by affecting the pressure exerted on the median nerve.

Reports say, "In one study volunteers type on a keyboard split in half so that both sides can be rotated up and down or moved apart to form an inverted V. The keyboard is adjusted 10 ways, with typists working for 20 minute stretches on each configuration. Their hands and wrists are attached to electrical wires, each movement, such as arm and wrist angles and fingertip force, is recorded on a computer."

The lab uses infrared cameras to record motion of the fingers, wrist and arm as the volunteer types on different keyboards or performs other tasks.

**** GE Computer System Invaded ****

Word in New York is that General Electric Co. computers connected to the Internet have been invaded by digital intruders.

The Wall Street Journal quotes a GE spokeswoman as confirming invaders gained access to research and proprietary information on GE computers in two cities.

The paper says the intruders managed to penetrate robust "firewalls" security barriers and to look at files pertaining to NBC, the TV network owned by GE.

The Journal also said the hackers also obtained the passwords of workers who were using GE computers to connect to more than a dozen other Internet computers, including at least one other company and several universities.

The GE spokeswoman said she didn't know details about the computer break-in, "we just know that the system was compromised." She confirmed that after the breach was detected more than a week ago, GE pulled its computers from Internet and revamped its security measures. GE reinstated its Internet connection Friday night, a GE employee told the paper.

**** SPA Settles Two Piracy Cases ****

The Software Publishers Association says it has settled two software piracy cases for a total of $450,000.

In a statement, the SPA said, "In addition to the penalties paid to the SPA, the organizations were also required to destroy all illegal software programs and repurchase authorized software. The organizations, whose identities must remain anonymous, were using unauthorized software from over 50 members of the SPA."

The trade group says the two matters began as calls to the association's anti-piracy hotline (1-800/388-7478) and were handled through SPA's corporate audit program.

The SPA also said the level of domestic software piracy has declined from a high of $2.6 billion in 1988 to an estimated $1.6 billion today, but "there remains a significant amount of work to be done so that all software companies are fairly compensated for their works."

THE DEALER VIEWPOINT

By Sheldon Winick

Recently, there has been a lively discussion concerning the sometimes large disparity between product pricing at local dealers compared to mail-order merchandisers. Both consumers' reactions and their perceived reactions from the dealers themselves have been discussed.

The question as to what is a fair price for a particular product can be difficult to answer at times. It must be remembered that many large volume mail-order merchandisers can offer extremely low prices because they can afford to purchase products at lower prices from the manufacturer or distributor because they can purchase in larger quantities. Mail order sales also don't require a large amount of floor display space or salesman time, so the overhead costs of doing business are reduced. By and large, most smaller local dealers, on the other hand, can offer more personalized service to their customers.

Here in our small Atari community, there are very few mail-order-only dealers still around. The larger dealerships involved in mail order sales also have a storefront for local sales. That can be a major benefit even for non-local customers, since this type of dealer has the sales and service support staff to provide a more personalized service to all their customers.

The problem still remains as to what should be fair pricing for various products. What should the consumer do when he is faced with the situation where his nearest local or regional dealer is charging a considerably higher price for products that are currently being advertised in national publications for lower prices?

One writer suggested making a counter offer to the dealers price. However, since most of us don't live in a 'barter' society as do some other cultures, that approach may well be misunderstood by some dealers. Instead of taking the chance of antagonizing the dealer, it would probably be better to merely let him, or her, know what other dealers are advertising that particular product for (and where they are being advertised -- in a CURRENT advertisement). Then you can ask if he could match the price, or at least come close. Remember that your mail-order purchase price will be increased by the cost of shipping, and in the case of Canadian orders across the border, that infernal Canadian GST (Goods and Services Tax).

And, most of all, please don't be offended yourself if the dealer says he can't match a special advertised price. It may well be that the price you've seen advertised is below your dealer's actual cost, or may be a closeout special on a discontinued or out-of-date product. It also wouldn't hurt to call the advertiser to verify if the advertised product is actually in stock. It is not uncommon in this industry, unfortunately, for some dealers to lowball price products they don't have in stock. Even concientious merchants can sometimes be caught up in the time lag between when advertisements are placed and when they actually make it to print. Products that may have been readily available and heavily stocked for a special promotion can sometimes be sold out by the time the printed advertisement reaches the hands of the consumer. In any event, make sure what you've seen advertised is legitimate and actually in stock at the advertiser before throwing a lowball price at your local/regional dealer and accusing him of trying to rip off his customers.

Remember also that it is a lot easier, and faster, to get help from a local dealer, or return a defective product for exchange, than it is from a mail order merchant. That personalized local service is definitely worth something! While the better mail-order merchandisers offer online support or direct phone support, replacing a defective product will still take at least a few days. In the case of some less caring mail-order merchants, even such relatively minor problems can become nightmares for the consumer.

Bottom line is Caveat Emptor -- buyer beware. The 'lowest advertised price' isn't always what it may appear to be on the surface; it may not be your 'best' price' when you take into account all the other variables.

Even if a consumer does decide to shop via mail order, which frequently may well be the only viable alternative, remember that not all mail order merchandisers are alike, just as all local retail merchants aren't alike. Find merchants with a good reputation and you'll be much better off in the long run. There are far too many instances of consumers prepaying for products that merchants don't have in stock (check each merchant's policy regarding charging your credit card for backordered items) and making the customer wait for weeks or months before the order is shipped.

Some merchants have also been known to tell customers that a particular product is in stock when in actuality is isn't -- that's why you need to check a merchant's reputation for honesty and dependability. In worst cases, some unscrupulous merchandisers have also been known to never fill some orders at all after receiving prepayment. Check out the appropriate topics here on GEnie for customer complaints. If you're ever in doubt about a particular dealer, ask in the GEnie Atari Roundtable about personal experiences.

If you choose to prepay by check instead of charge card, check with the merchant's policy regarding when the order will actually be shipped. Many mail order merchants hold check orders for a week or longer while waiting for the check to clear. Even for merchants who have that policy, there is really no reason for it to continue once your have an established account with the merchant. If he expects you to trust him with filling your orders promptly and properly, there is really no reason he shouldn't be expected to trust you to fulfill your part of the bargain as well, by paying him with a good check. Most commercial banks make deposits into their business customers' accounts within 24 hours after it is submitted by the merchant.

It is also possible to order from most mail-order

merchants using a C.O.D. (Cash on Delivery) form of payment. That will at least insure that you aren't prepaying for something that cannot be delivered without undue delay.

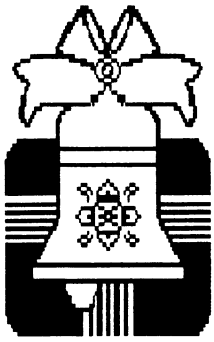
Best of all, try to develop a good working relationship between yourself and whichever dealers you choose to do business with. You don't necessarily have to limit yourself to dealing with only one dealer either. It may well be to your benefit to develop a good relationship with several dealers in order to take advantage of each dealer's strong points and benefits. The better dealers will also cooperate with each other and refer you to another one if they cannot provide you with a particular product or service that you are looking for.

Most of all, remember that you are their employer -- it is their responsibility to cater to YOUR needs and desires. Your purchases and support pay their salary; they need you a lot more than you need them. If their attitude doesn't reflect that reality, take your business elsewhere, and let them know why you're doing so. That will at least give them the final opportunity to try to make amends, and hopefully change their attitude towards future customers.

Happy (Atari) Computing.

(Editor's note: This article is one of an on-going series and while there are many valid points made, the opinions are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of this Newsletter staff or those of the Mid-Florida Atari Computer Club.

Sheldon owns and operates Computer STudio, a full-service Atari dealership in Asheville, North Carolina. Sheldon is also a registered architect, and has operated his own architectural office since 1971 (he is currently licensed in Florida, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Colorado, as well as holding a National NCARB certificate). His architectural practice has been using Atari computers exclusively since 1988, when his last Xerox computer system was retired. His current architectural drawings are, of course, prepared on his Atari TT030-based CADD systems, using DynaCADD software.)



A CHRISTMAS BYTE

by Lawrence A. Cohen

'Twas the night before Christmas, the office lay dark,
Not a keyboard was tapping, each mouse sat in park
The FAX wasn't faxing, the phones all lay quiet
No salesman was heard telling customers, "Buy it!"

And in silence so thick, could be cut with a knife,
Suddenly a monitor twinkled to life.
And out of the disk drive, a finger so thin
Reached out to the keyboard and logged himself in!

And suddenly the room was alive with a light
Of hundreds of watts and of grand megabytes!
And out of that monitor sprang lightening quick
A little round elf that looked just like Saint Nick.

But instead of a hat and red jacket and boots
This Santa was dressed in a grey Business suit!
His shoes polished black and suit pressed beyond reason,
Only his Yuletide red tie was in sync with the season.

He reached into his breifcase and pulled out with a smile
A bundle of checks that reached nearly a mile!
Then he hopped desk to desk at a mystical pace,
And left Christmas Bonuses in-everyone's place!

And he chuckled to think how each person would pause
At the little red signature sighed "Santa Claus."
But he hoped that the message was clear he would leave:
That even in business, you gotta believe!

Then he ran to the copier and climbed up a rope,
and onto the glass he placed the word "Hope."
As he pressed the green button, he said with a smile
"A million of these should last quite a while!"

Next he called to his friends and they quickly appeared,
A shiny white limo and eight small reindeer.
"On Modem, on Floppy, on Dos and on Mousepad
Now Database, Network, on VAR and on VAD!"

And as the limo flew back to the monitor spot
And the screen image grew smaller
and became a white dot,
A voice of encouragement one could still hear:
"Merry Christmas to all, and a Prosperous Year!"

COMPUTER AIRLINES

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By Bob Smith

I came across the following listing in my travels and thought that it was worthwhile to reprint the following information, especially for those of you that fly and use your Atari computer or use your Atari computer and fly. I do not know who originally wrote this, so that I am unable to give proper credit. Now fasten your seatbelts, make sure your tray tables are in an upright and locked position, extinguish all smoking materials and up, up and away.....

What if an OS Ran Your Airplane:

DOS Airline: Everybody pushes the airplane until it glides, then they jump on and let the plane coast until it hits the ground again, then they push again, jump on again and so on.

DOS with QEMM Airline: The same thing but with more leg room to push.

Mac Airline: All the stewards, stewardesses, captains, baggage handlers, and ticket agents look the same, act the same, and talk the same. Every time you ask questions about details, you are told you don't need to know, don't want to know, and that everything will be done for you without you having to know, so just shut up.

OS/2 Airline: To board the plane, you have your ticket stamped ten different times by standing in ten different lines. Then you fill out a form showing where you want to sit and whether the plan should look and feel like an ocean liner, a passenger train, or a bus. If you succeed in getting on board the plane and the plane succeeds in getting off the ground, you have a wonderful trip... except for the times when the rudder and flaps get frozen in position, in which case you have time to say your prayers and get in crash position.

Windows Airline: The airport terminal is nice and colorful, with friendly stewards and stewardesses, easy access to the plane, anda completely uneventful takeoff...then, once in the air, the plane blows up without any warning whatsoever.

Win NT Airline: Everyone marches out on the runway, says the password in unison, and forms the outline of an airplane. Then they all sit down and make a whooshing sound like they're flying.

Unix Airline: Everyone brings one piece of the plane with them when they come to the airport. They all go out on the runway and put the plane together piece by piece, arguing constantly about what kind of plane they're building.

Mach Airline: There is no airplane. The passengers gather and shout for an airplane, then wait and wait and wait and wait. A bunch of people come, each carrying one piece of the plane with them. These people all go out on the runway and put the plane together piece by piece, arguing constantly about what kind of plane they're building. The plane finally takes off, leaving the passengers on the ground waiting and waiting and waiting and waiting. After the plane lands, the pilot telephones the passengers at the departing airport to inform them that they have arrived.

What's A TOS Error?

By Al Fasoldt

Here's an excert from John Townsend's TOS error guide:

TOS Error #35, probably the most common error alert that is not self explanatory, happens when a program you are trying to run has somehow been corrupted. What it means is that TOS can not find some magic numbers it expects to find either at the beginning or at the end of the program file. This error is usually attributable to operator error (as in trying to execute an archive or text file as a program), or to bit rot.

...

The GEM function which displays "TOS Error #..." does not display in the alert box the actual error value returned by GEMDOS or BIOS. Those return values are negative numbers (e.g. GEMDOS error -66 is "Invalid program load format"). Negative GEMDOS error returns are translated to MS-DOS error numbers for the form_error() alert box you see. BIOS errors result in a "Critical Error" alert, which gives you a chance to retry the disk access that caused the error.

For those of you with a furniture fetish, here's a table:

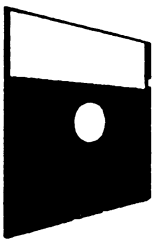
Error description	GEMDOS error	MS-DOS error	Alert text (TOS 1.4 and later)
Invalid function #	-32	1	TOS Error #1.
File not found	-33	2	This application cannot
Path not found	-34	3	find the folder or file
No more files	-49	18	you just tried to access.
Too many open files	-35	4	This application does not have room to open another document. To make room, close any document that you do not need.
Access denied	-36	5	An item with this name already exists in the directory, or this item is set to Read Only status.
Invalid handle	-37	6	TOS Error #6.
Insufficient memory	-39	8	There is not enough memory
Invalid memory block addr.	-40	9	in your computer for the application you just tried to run.
Invalid drive	-46	15	The drive you specified does not exist.
Not same drive (on rename)	-48	17	TOS Error #17.
Seek out of range	-64	n/a	TOS Error #33.
Internal error	-65	n/a	TOS Error #34.
Invalid prg load format	-66	n/a	(the infamous) TOS Error#35.
Setblock failed	-67	n/a	TOS Error #36.

Note that some MS-DOS error codes do not have equivalent GEMDOS errors, and some GEMDOS error codes do not exist in MS-DOS.

Here are the BIOS "Critical" errors, and the alert text you see when they happen:

Error description	TOS error	Alert text (TOS 1.4 and later)
Basic, fundamental error	-1	Your output device is not
No paper	-9	receiving data.
Unknown device	-15	
Drive not ready	-2	Drive X: is not responding
Unknown command	-3	Please check the disk drive,
Bad request (invalid length)	-5	or insert a disk.
Seek error	-6	
CRC error	-4	Data on the disk in drive
Unknown medium	-7	X: may be damaged.
Sector not found	-8	
Write fault	-10	
Read fault	-11	
General failure	-12	
Bad sectors on format	-16	
Write protect	-13	The disk in drive X: is physically write-protected.
Media change	-14	The application cannot read data on the disk in drive X:.
Insert other disk	-17	Please insert disk X into drive A:.

(Editor's notes: This is a very good article to either have handy around your computer or to memorize.



Advanced 8-bit Graphics Systems

You Won't Believe Your Eyes

by Thomas J. Andrews

Computer graphics have come a long way since the Atari 8-bit was first designed. While the 8-bit has long been able to handle text from any computer, it's been unable to display graphics from such platforms as ST, Amiga, and VGA. That is, not until recently.

Some time ago, the folks at CompuServe saw the desirability of being able to transfer graphics from one platform to another, so they developed and copyrighted GIF, or Graphics Interchange Format. This hardware-independent format is an adaptation of the same algorithm used by ARC/UNARC programs. Theoretically, all a user needs is a decoder to translate and display graphics from this format, no matter what computer they were created on, or which one he uses.

In practice, it's not that simple. The ST, Amiga, and other systems have higher resolutions and can display more colors at one time than the 8-bit. So, while an 8-bit could decode a GIF file, displaying it is another matter entirely.

We Can So Do It!

These obstacles, though, are not insurmountable. Through the use of pixel averaging techniques, high resolution pictures can be reduced in resolution to something the 8-bit can display and still be recognizable. Several techniques using the properties of the 8-bit OS and taking advantage of persistance of vision in the human eye can effectively display more colors than the official 8-bit specifications would indicate.

One of the earliest attempts at a GIF decoder was *ATVIEW8* by Dan Davis. This program decoded into a GR. 15 screen with four colors.

APAC (Any Point, Any Color) was described in *Analog Computing* #60 (May 1988) by Thomas Tanida. With this method, scan lines of Graphics 11 (16 colors, 1 luminance) alternate with Graphics 9 (1 color, 16 luminances) scan lines on the screen. From a distance, these lines blend together and can produce a total of 256 colors. The resolution for this method is 80H (horizontal) by 96V (vertical) pixels per screen.

Interlaced APAC (.ILC) was introduced by Charles Blaquiere and refined somewhat by Jeff Potter of Port Orange, Florida. This technique uses page flipping to interlace two APAC screens. This increases the resolution to 80H by 192V and eliminates distracting black lines that appear in APAC graphics. It also can produce 256 colors.

PRYZM (.PZM) was developed by Daryll Yong. This method page flips between two screens, one in Graphics 9, the other in Graphics 11. No interlacing is involved. PRYZM produces the same 256 colors and 80 by 192 resolution as Interlaced APAC.

COLRVIEW, another method developed by Jeff Potter, uses a principle borrowed from color television. On a color TV screen, each pixel is made up of three components–one red, one green,and one blue. All colors are produced by varying the intensities of these components. These component pixels are so small that our eyes blend them together from any appreciable distance.

COLRVIEW uses a somewhat similar approach. Three component screens are placed in RAM, one each in red, green, and blue. On the first display scan, the first line is from the red component, the second from the green, the third from the blue, the fourth from the red again, and so on for the entire screen. On the second scan, the first line is from the green component, the second from the blue, and the third from the red. On the third scan, the first is blue, the next is red, the next is green, and, well, you get the picture.

All this scan line manipulation requires extensive use of Display List Interrupts (DLI's), Vertical Blank Interrupts (VBI's), and page flipping to accomplish its task, so it uses *lots* of RAM. This method currently supports Graphics 15 resolution (160 by 192), where it can produce 64 colors, and Graphics 9 (80 by 192), where it can produce a whopping 4096 colors.

OK, Are There Some Programs For This?

So how is an 8-bit user to use these techniques? Well, we're in luck. Jeff Potter (funny how that name keeps coming up, isn't it?) has written a series of Shareware programs for this very purpose.

The anchor of the series is *APACVIEW 2.4*. This program will decode GIF files and display the graphics directly in APAC mode. It can also decode GIF files into PRYZM, ILC, Gr.9, Gr.11, and COLRVIEW formats. APAC, PRYZM, and ILC pictures can be loaded and displayed by *APACVIEW*. The COLRVIEW system requires too much RAM for a viewer to coexist with a GIF decoder in a 48K Atari, so that has to go into a separate program. A special "joystick mode" allows the user to zero in on a section of the graphic, then reload that section enlarged to fill the screen.

COLRVIEW files can be viewed with *COLRVIEW 2.6*. This program not only displays the graphics; it allows the user to "tune" the balance and intensity of the individual color components. It also includes a "slide show" mode, where several graphics can be shown in succession.

APACSHOW is a slide show program for APAC files, and includes a random pixel dissolve between images.

DEGASRD translates and displays *DEGAS* and *DEGAS ELITE* files in COLRVIEW formats. *DEGAS* is an ST drawing program that produces pictures in three different resolutions, two color and one monochrome. *DEGAS* has its own compression format, and *DEGASRD* will convert either the compressed or uncompressed files. It also has a slide show feature and color tuning capability.

ILBMREAD views Amiga IFF pictures in APAC mode, and has a joystick mode similar to the one in *APACVIEW.*

For you 8-bit artists out there, *GIFNCODE* will convert *MicroPainter, Micro Illustrator*, Graphics 8, and Graphics 9 pictures into GIF format, so you can exchange them with owners of other computer platforms.

So, Do They Work?

I have used *APACVIEW 2.4, COLRVIEW 2.6*, and *DEGASRD*, trying out the different display options, and I found significant differences. I don't have a color monitor at the present time, but I do have easy access to two very different TV sets. One is a 14-year-old Zenith 21", and the other is an even older 13" Panasonic using vacuum tubes. (My mother won't allow a computer in the same ROOM with her new monitor/receiver. *SIGH*)

At my request, ACE of Syracuse Backstairs BBS (315-458-0118) Sysop, Ken Wickert, uploaded several GIF files to the 8-bit Graphics file SIG. *APACVIEW* reports the resolution and number of colors in a file before it converts it, and it reported various resolutions for the files at 256 colors each. Using a combination of *APACVIEW* and *COLRVIEW*, I converted and viewed each file in each 8-bit format.

All of the display techniques seem to be very display hardware-dependent. For APAC and ILC especially, the color intensity must be turned up higher than normal. With my equipment, the Panasonic could be turned up higher than the Zenith. According to the program docs, this is common among different monitors, too. Jeff Potter recommends that on monitors with separate luma and chroma input options, the composite input should be used instead for best results with APAC.

The least desirable display turned out to be PRYZM mode, mostly because it had the highest amount of image flicker. While there is a certain amount of flicker in all these methods, with all but PRYZM it could be reduced to barely noticeable levels by careful adjustment of the TV set. Results might be different with different hardware.

The APAC and ILC formats had less flicker, but had washed-out colors on the Zenith. On the Panasonic, I had better color intensity, but when I attempted to adjust the colors with the tint control, some would appear correct when others didn't. No matter how I adjusted, I couldn't seem to get all the colors to look like they were correct at the same time. I believe this is because while APAC and the pictures each have 256-color palettes, they don't necessarily use the SAME 256 colors. Later information from Jeff Potter indicated that this was, indeed, the case. Jeff also indicated that monitors with comb filters seem to have the best APAC and ILC displays. Neither of these TVs has a comb filter.

COLRVIEW was a different story. Using the Graphics 9 resolution, with its 4096 possible colors, I saw graphics displays I never thought I'd see produced with an 8-bit. While the results of the pixel averaging and lower resolution are certainly noticeable, from a short distance, the more subtle color shadings give at least the illusion of fine detail. COLRVIEW displays had the best quality, by far, of any of these techniques, on BOTH televisions. The Graphics 9 resolution was generally best for digital photos, while Graphics 15 seemed best for cartoon and line drawings. Color balance and "correctness" were excellent.

Program operations are simple and straightforward, with one-key commands used wherever possible. Commands common to all members of the series used the same keystrokes, making it easier to go from one program to the other. I found no obvious operational bugs.

Can They Get Even Better?

I do have a couple of suggestions for future versions of *APACVIEW.* First, converting a GIF file for COLRVIEW is a multi-stage process requiring several commands. It would be easy for a user to mess up the sequence and not notice it until finished, thus wasting several minutes of effort. If a new command could be added to automate the procedure, it would be a significant improvement.

Secondly, I was using DOS 2.5 on a 256K RAMBO-enhanced 800XL, with Tim Patrick's SmartRAM 1050 emulator (ANTIC 9/89). Converting a GIF file from the RAMdisk cuts the required time about in half. This is especially helpful in the multi-stage COLRVIEW conversion. The user can choose to display the graphic as it is converted, a sometimes fascinating thing to watch. Unfortunately, *APACVIEW's* screen memory resides within the 16K bank switching window of the XL. This means that with a RAMBO enhancement, as the RAMdisk is accessed, the contents of the particular bank switched in are flashed on the screen as if they were part of the display. While this doesn't really hurt anything, visually it can be quite annoying. Moving the screen memory to a location outside the bank switching window would cure the problem.

I have some ideas for programs I'd like to see added to the series. I'd like to see a program or programs that would convert other ST and Amiga formats to COLRVIEW. I also think it would be great to have programs that would translate from GIF, ST, and Amiga formats directly to a monochrome and/or color printer, keeping as much resolution as possible.

Is That All There Is?

Most of the above text was written early in 1993, for publication at that time. For various reasons which are unimportant here, it was never published. Since that time a lot has been happening on the COLRVIEW front.

Saving a picture with the original *COLRVIEW* system requires three separate 62-sector disk files, one for each component screen. In addition, there is no identification as to the graphics mode of the picture, either 9 or 15. That had to be set by the user at display time. In March 1993, Earl Halliwell developed the *COLRVIEWSquash* system. This system takes the three COLRVIEW files and, using a method developed from the *Micro Illustrator* compression format, combines and compresses the component files into one compact file, labeled with the .RGB extender. Graphics mode information is included in the file, as is a short display caption. A companion program, *Colr/Squash/View*, is used to display the pictures, either individually or as a slide show.

These programs are easy to use, and work very well. Surprisingly, I noticed little time difference between the loading and decoding of a RGB file and that of a regular COLRVIEW file triad. The displays are reproduced faithfully, and the RGB files take up a lot less space. The only problem I found was that *ColrSquashView* is completely incompatible with *Turbo Basic XL*.

Sometime in early Spring, a new COLRVIEW mode was developed in Graphics 8 resolution. I don't know who gets the credit for the original idea. Jeff and Earl say that it just seemed to develop naturally. This mode gives 320 by 192 resolution, but only 8 colors. Still, that's several more than we had in Graphics 8 before.

Due to the widespread recognition and interest that *COLRVIEW* began to generate, GEnie 8-bit SYSOP, Craig S. Thom, created a special sub-library of files for *COLRVIEW* pictures and utilities. Most, if not all, pictures that had already been uploaded were converted to the compressed RGB format. *COLRVIEW* has become a regular topic of discussion, both in the GEnie Atari8 BBS messages and at the weekly Real Time Conferences, where it is regularly referred to as CV.

A New Star Is Rising

Jeff is hard at work on the next logical member of his program series, which he tentatively calls *JVIEW XL*. What does this program do? Why, that should be obvious. *JVIEW XL* decodes GIF files into COLRVIEW format. *JVIEW XL* is in the beta test stage, and I have been privileged to be selected as one of Jeff's beta testers. Consequently, I can give you a preliminary idea of what the program can do.

JVIEW requires an XL/XE with at least 64k of RAM. As I said before, a COLRVIEW display and a GIF decoder cannot co-exist in a 48k machine, so *JVIEW* makes use of the 16k of RAM beneath the OS. At present, it has been debugged for use with MYDOS only. It seems to work just fine with DOS 2.5, but won't work with SpartaDOS.

The command structure is similar to the other programs in the –VIEW series, but some new commands have been added. A single command now decodes GIF's into CV format. The display problem I had when decoding from a RAMdisk with *APACVIEW* has been corrected, and it's now a joy to watch. If you're in a hurry, you can still blank out the screen to increase decoding speed by about 30%. You can even toggle the display in and out to check on the decoding progress. *JVIEW* also has a "joystick mode," similar to that for *APACVIEW*.

But Wait, There's More

If GIF-to-CV decoding were all that *JVIEW* does, it would be a valuable addition to the 8-bit software base–but that isn't all it does. For the first time, as far as I know, DITHERING is introduced to the 8-bit. Now, I don't pretend to know much about what dithering really is, so I can't explain much about it. I do know from reading David Barkin's Running Out of RAM column here in *CN* that it is used extensively in computer photographic manipulation and enhancement.

What it *seems* to do for CV pictures is to add more intensities and colors to the display. Jeff tells me that the extra colors are only simulated, but my eyes can't tell the difference, especially at a distance. Digital photos, which previously had to be done in CV9 to look best, now frequently look better in CV15. Dithered CV15 displays are sharper and more focused-appearing than non-dithered CV9 displays. *JVIEW* has four dither settings, two specifically designed for CV9 and CV15, one for CV8, and one for all three. Non-dithering is also available.

Decoded color images may be saved in either CV three-file format or CVSquash compressed RGB format. Most importantly, the effects of the dithering are passed along into the saved files, so they do appear when displayed with the various slide show programs. You can also decode into Graphics 8, 9, or 15 monochrome displays, which can then be saved into single 62-sector files for use with other programs.

A couple of things about *JVIEW* surprised me. First, the decoding process into CV isn't significantly longer than that for APAC. Second, using the various dithering modes added no time to the decoding, at least according to my digital wrist watch. The RAMdisk advantage isn't as pronounced as it is with APACVIEW, 30% as opposed to 50%, but it's still significant.

When Can We Get JVIEW XL?

Jeff is adamant about not announcing a release date for *JVIEW*. Unlike Atari, he doesn't want to make a promise he might not be able to keep. Right now, he's digesting the reports and suggestions of his beta testers, trying to decide if any changes should be made. I won't mention the other features under consideration, since they may not make it into the final version. Just as it is, *JVIEW* is a great program, and I eagerly await its first public release. Jeff does say it should be soon.

In the meantime, you can get an idea of *JVIEW's* abilities by downloading some of the CV picture files from GEnie and Compuserve. Several of these files have been uploaded by Jeff and his beta testers. Most are in RGB format, so you'll need

The Making of Maze of AGDAgon

by Chuck Steinman, DataQue Products

The recently released multi-computer, multi-player video game called *Maze of AGDAgon (MoA)* has been in development for over three years. What began as a simple exercise in inter-computer communications, now is a full-featured game.

Several years ago, I released a simple Tic-Tac-Toe game that used the joystick ports to connect two Atari 8-bit systems together. The game, called *Tic-Tac-Two*, used what I designated as the GameLink protocol to allow the game status to be shared between the two computers. The slow speed and massive software overhead of this networking scheme lead to the development of the GameLinkII system.

GameLinkII would use the SIO port on all 8-bit systems to connect several Atari computers together. Since this port is interrupt driven by a UART in PoKey, it worked out much better. Another great benefit was that it would allow the program to be downloaded from the master computer to each slave. Now only one copy of the software on disk or cartridge would be needed for all players.

Now that a better network had been designed, it was time to develop an application that would use it. I decided that the monumental task of developing a multi-player game would require too much effort for one person, so I started cornering people who I thought would help out.

Jeff Potter was one of the early favorites, due to his great experience with bitmapped graphics (*COLORVIEW, APACVIEW*), and his recently released game (*CRABNEBULA*). I wanted this game to have outstanding graphics, but within the limits of memory and available processor time. This would require on-the-fly decoding of compressed image data. Jeff accepted the challenge, and we began to start coding this monster in early 1991.

Shortly after we started, it still looked like we might need more help. Since we both had GEnie accounts, it was decided that we would form an area there to collect ideas and people. The group was called AGDA (Atari Game Developer's Association), with the area on GEnie as our development arena. We picked up several people who served as both idea generators and also beta testers.

After several months rolled by, I contacted Jeff Casbeer, hoping that he would join the group. I had downloaded a game called *CARNY*, which he had written, that I thought had been done well. He indicated that he would help out on a limited basis, so he designed the sound effects engine for the *Maze of AGDAgon*. There were quite a few restrictions placed on Jeff C. while writing the sound engine, since we wanted to keep all the code fully transportable. Several weeks later, the sound effects files were done.

Over the next few years, the game was enhanced, defined, aligned and modified numerous times. The network and graphics were tweaked until it seemed we were about tweaked out! There were several stubborn little quirks that took quite a bit of time to iron out. Jeff Potter had the patience to work them out, though. By the end of 1993, it looked like things were finally coming together.

One of the big problems we had while developing *AGDAgon* was that all of us were using different software development packages. Each time we made changes to the code, we had to send it to the other programmers, who had to re-format it. Jeff Potter and I probably moved the complete source code package between us at least a half-dozen times. Each time, it had to be converted to the format used by the next programmer. This is not a small list either; currently, there are three dozen source files, which produce a list file of over 350K bytes.

But, all the work was worth it. We now have released 1.0 distributed though shareware, with posts on both GEnie and Compuserve. Hopefully, from there the file has expanded to bulletin boards; and club libraries have added *AGDAgon* to their list of files. Now, the cartridge version has just been finalized, and GameLinkII cables are available, as well.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

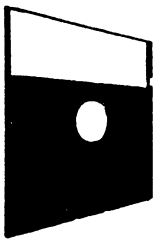
Advanced 8-Bit Graphics

Earl Halliwell's *CVSquash* program package to view them. All of the other programs I've mentioned here can be found in the GEnie and Compuserve libraries, as well as from other shareware sources. Hundreds of GIF files can be found scattered all over GEnie and CIS.

Any Questions?

If you have any questions for Jeff Potter or Earl Halliwell, you can contact them on GEnie. Jeff's GEnie address is JDPOTTER, and Earl's is E.HALLIWELL. You can also find Jeff on Compuserve at 74030,2020. Both are very active in the 8-bit community, and regularly attend the GEnie Real Time Conferences (Thursdays, 10:00 pm Eastern time.) Jeff also frequents the Compuserve Conference (Sundays, 9:00 pm Eastern time).

These advanced graphics programs expand the capabilities of the 8-bit into areas that wouldn't have been dreamed of just a few years ago. Programmers like Jeff Potter and Earl Halliwell need our support and encouragement to continue this type of expansion. Please help give it to them.



Maze of AGDAgon

An A-Maze-ing New Game for the Atari 8-bit

Review by David A. Paterson

Most of my friends have gone beyond 8-bit computer systems. They brag about their 486/33s with SVGA and 8 megs of RAM, and show off the games they have that take advantage of that hardware. But whenever it comes down to multi-player games, my collection of old, reliable Atari 8-bits takes the day. Usually, we dust off my 800 and play *Ali Baba* or *Asteroids* or *BallBlazer*, and there's always *MULE* if we really want to get violent. (*MULE* playing tip: If you sit on top of another player, he can't do anything in the auction.) Now, my friends and I have *another* multi-player game to play: *Maze of AGDAgon* (*MoA*).

An in-GEnie-ous Idea

MoA started out on GEnie when people began discussing Atari's ill-fated *MidiMaze* for the 8-bit. A small crew of dedicated Atarians decided to make it a reality and dubbed themselves the AGDA group, for Atari Game Developers Association. J.D. Potter, best known for the *APACView* and *ColorView* programs, and Chuck Steinman of DataQue were the driving forces that brought this project together. Their effort was truly a labor of love, and deserves our support. [Editor's Note: See Chuck Steinman's "The Making of MoA," in this issue for more on this. –RR]

MoA is unique in that every player requires his own computer and monitor. One computer, called the Host, loads the program from disk (though a cartridge version is available now). Everyone else hooks his computer up to the first one using a special serial cable called the GameLink II. As each other person turns on his computer, the program loads from the host. These cables can be built by the "do-it-yourselfer" or purchased from DataQue/Lex-Tronics (see ordering information at the end of this review). To test out the program, there are even instructions available to build a "temporary" cable by sticking paper clips into the ends of two standard SIO cables!?! The GameLink II architecture supports up to eight users, including the host.

Okay, Let's Play

MoA is a first-person perspective maze game. Each player sees the maze in front of him on his screen. Above the maze are the vital statistics of any game: time, score, bombs, lives, location and direction. Players stalk the maze looking for each other, firing bombs at each other when spotted. Shouts and moans sound around the room as people maneuver each other into corners and fire away. More devious players let their opponents destroy each other, then take control. Each person begins with three lives. Once killed three times, players become ghosts, able to wander the maze but unable to affect anything, making *MoA* the first game I know of with an afterlife.

Players can carry up to three bombs. Supplies can be replenished by the round white bombs scattered at random in the maze. Bombs have a limited lifespan; after about 30 seconds you'll hear a warning tone and then they'll disappear. Once fired, bombs give off a warbling warning tone; if you hear an incoming bomb there's just enough time to run for it. Bombs are directional, and will destroy everything straight ahead of them.

Bombs have one other use besides getting rid of the competition. Pulling back on the joystick shows a map of the maze. If you press the fire button while looking at this map and have at least two bombs, the current positions of all your enemies will be revealed. This glimpse will cost you two bombs from your limited supply, so it's best to be prudent.

With Friends Like These...

For my big playtest session, I set up two TVs and a monochrome monitor with an 800, a 130xe and an XEGS. My homebred GameLink II cable was met with frustration by one friend. "If I want to play multi-player games on my PC, I'd have to pay hundreds of dollars for network cards. And you're telling me that that mishmash of parts will do the same?" he whined. (So, I'm not so handy with a soldering iron, OK?)

The actual display for *MoA* is fairly simple. The maze walls are in three colors, giving a visual indication of your direction. The other players are round red faces with a crooked sort of grin. Extra bombs are white balls hanging in mid-air. Cunning *MoA* players lurk behind the bombs, luring others in to pick up the bombs, then attacking. Of course, your bombs usually choose to decay right about then.

Playing the game is fun. My friends and I yelled, hollered and moaned when things went against us. One friend, whenever killed out, would start running around the maze as a ghost, looking for me then calling out his own co-ordinates, letting my other friend

hunt me down. You have to be careful when you set up your playing area–if the monitors are too close together it can be really tempting to look at your neighbor's location and hunt him down.

As the game goes on, strategy becomes more important. New bombs appear in the maze periodically, but never quite enough. Being chased through the maze by a well-armed maniac and being unable to find a single bomb gets the adrenalin pumping.

We did manage to crash the game once, though I'm not sure how. One person rolled into a spot on the maze and couldn't move or be killed; another moved beside the first and froze as well. Hitting System Reset on all three computers got us out of that jam, and nothing else out of the ordinary took place in our playing.

Not Completely A-maze-ing

The maze in *MoA* updates quickly as you move and turn. The sound, though simple, doesn't distract from the gameplay. I've only got a few beefs with the game.

Beef #1: The size of the maze window. Your view of the maze fills the bottom third of the screen. It's just a bit too small for my liking. [Editor's Note: If you are familiar with the old 8-bit game, *Way Out!*, the window is about that size. See the accompanying picture to get an idea of what this looks like.–RR]

Beef #2: No computer-controlled opponents. Since I can't always rustle up a friend or two to play with, I'd appreciate being able to practice against my computer.

Beef #3: Each player is referred to only by a number. In the original *ST MidiMaze*, each player gives his name. Then after being killed, you'd be told who just killed you.

Beef #4: With each player needing his own computer and monitor, space quickly disappears. Two players on a single computer and single screen would let more people in on the fun, and permit users with only one computer to play as well.

Conclusion

MoA is a great addition to any 8-bit gamer's library. Its multi-player action is sure to be a favorite; an eight-player game would be great at any user-group games night. Be sure to register your copy; for only $5.00 you can't go wrong. Here's hoping more software comes out which takes advantage of the GameLink II system; multiple player games are among the best. Thanks again, AGDA group!